

A

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

OF

LANCASTER COUNTY:

BEING A HISTORY OF

EARLY SETTLERS AND EMINENT MEN
OF THE COUNTY;

AS ALSO MUCH OTHER

UNPUBLISHED HISTORICAL INFORMATION, CHIEFLY
OF A LOCAL CHARACTER.

BY

ALEX. HARRIS.

LANCASTER, PA.:
ELIAS BARR & CO.
1872.

HERR, JOHN, the founder or organizer of the New Mennonite church, was born in Lancaster county, Pennsylvania, September 18th, 1781. His father, Francis, was the son of Emanuel Herr, one of the five sons of Hans Herr, who emigrated to Lancaster county in the year 1710. Hans Herr was the pastor and spiritual leader of a large colony of emigrants who made their way into the bounds of Lancaster county, and settled in what was known as the Pequea valley, and which is now included in the townships of Strasburg, Lampeter, Conestoga and others. The subject of our sketch belonged to a family noted in the early history of our county as leaders in religious opinions, many of whom were clergymen of the Mennonite persuasion. It would seem somewhat appropriate in this connection, to glance at the causes which induced the important movement in the Mennonite church,

which ultimated in its division into the old and new communions. It is an event of august concern in our county's history; one which deserves some consideration, and would space warrant, (which it does not) it should be treated in full detail. The inceptive impulse which led to the separation of the church was given by Francis Herr, the father of our subject. For sufficient reasons, Francis Herr became disunited with the old Mennonite church¹ of his fathers, and so remained till the period of his death. Being a man of considerable intellectual vigor, he was able to attract a number of followers who sympathized with him in his views, and who were in the habit of meeting together for spiritual conversation and edification of each other. In these meetings of Francis Herr and his followers nothing seems to have been further in view than to endeavor to act in accordance with Christ's promise, that he would be in the midst of two or three of those who should meet together in his name. These small assemblies were congregated in the name of the Redeemer, and His promise was fervently invoked upon their meetings. The design of founding an antagonistic church to that to which his ancestry had belonged, never perhaps entered the thoughts of Francis Herr or any of his followers. He was an earnest investigator of the doctrines of Menno Simon, and he critically compared them with the teaching of the gospel and the whole of the New Testament. This

¹The Mennonite Christians exhibit a simplicity of faith and worship that serves to call to mind the early days of the reformation epoch. Deducing their views from the literal sense of Scripture, they have not been seduced into the reception of new-coined and rationalistic theologies that have since the beginning of the eighteenth century been steadily making their way into the other churches of England, Holland, France and Germany. They may, (especially in America), therefore, be regarded as presenting the faith-type which most clearly portrays that which obtained in Europe in the sixteenth century. They have successfully resisted the insinuating currents of free thought that have been creeping into many of the other churches of Europe and America during the last one hundred and fifty years, and on this account they stand nearer than most others in accord with the views of the Reformed fathers. Perched upon the mount of Gospel faith, the rippling brook of deistic unbelief, the encyclopedic stream of French infidelity, and the surging flood of German rationalism have passed by scarcely noticed by the inerudite followers of Menno Simon; and the opinions of this early

investigation served but to convince him that the teaching of that reformer was fully supported in the discourses of Christ and his apostles, and his chief aim seemed simply to be to aid in building up life-examples as the gospel enjoined. Doctrine, without a corresponding walk and conversation would, in his view, be of no avail. In all his exhortations to his small flock of followers, he urged upon them in the most emphatic manner, holiness of life and uprightness and godliness in all manner of conversation. What should it benefit him to be a full believer in the tenets of Menno Simon if his action did not conform thereto, and his walk be upright and pure. In a holy life, therefore, as he thought, did all Christian godliness consist.

In all this he had before him the example of the reformers of the sixteenth century. With them he agreed in endeavoring to bring back the purity of the early ages. Nothing further was his aim than the rejuvenation of Christian simplicity and piety in the life and actions of his small band of faithful followers. All this, in his estimation, was attainable outside of nominal church organization; and the communion of the spirit of Christ and his fellowship was all that was desirable. This could be secured in the bosom of his small company of sympathizers, who were in the habit of meeting together for mutual consolation.

But at length the winged arrow of death bore Francis reformer yet shine in the vales of the fatherland and on the American continent in all their pristine purity.

The important movement in the Mennonite church, the establishment of a theological seminary in Europe in 1735, was an event that occurred after their early settlements had been made in America. This has given to the European church an educated ministry, and an array of distinguished Mennonite clergymen stand conspicuous in modern ecclesiastical history. Their brethren in America prefer, on the contrary, pastors of apostolic simplicity, and as yet maintain with a tenacious grasp the uncorrupted creed of their fathers.

The American Mennonites see in Christianity a perfect system as it flowed forth from the mouth of the Redeemer of mankind, instead of being a progressive science as is contended by learned modern expositors. Little else in their view is required of the ministers of Christ; save that they shall be able to read the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. The critical acumen of a Reimarus, Wolff, Ernesti, or Semler, is not desired by these plain followers of the ancient doctrines.

Herr from the scenes of his life's activity and from the companionship of his faithful circle of followers, and his freed spirit took its flight to regions beyond the skies. His mantle, however, fell upon worthy shoulders—upon him whose task it should become as the master workman to polish the un-hewn material that his father had been gathering, and therefrom erect a living temple fitted to resist the adverse blasts of persecution, and which is being constantly increased, enlarged and beautified. The architect of the Christian edifice referred to is the subject of our notice.

Of the youthful career of John Herr, whose sketch we pen, little data exist. Having never preserved any diary of his labors, all that can be gathered of his career comes through tradition. It is, however, inferable from the career in which his father was engaged, that our subject was trained in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and that the lessons of truth and morality were taught him by his pious mother. It is said of him that in youth he was of a gay and lively disposition, fond of society, and that he engaged in the sports of his comrades to a great extent. His conscience was, however, cast in a tender mould, and his horror of sin was so acute that he frequently lamented with tears during the night, the follies of which by day he had been guilty. In these secret hours of the night, when all around him was hushed in sleep, he would deplore his imperfections and promise to the Saviour an amendment of his course of life. But these, like the ordinary evanescent promises of youth, were forgotten. The dawn of day and the appearance of his youthful comrades, again dispelled the good resolves, and carnal desires and natural enjoyments soon seated themselves in his affections.

His educational attainments were of limited scope. Besides the acquisition of the simple elementary branches of reading, writing and arithmetic, he as a youth was not favored. Being possessed of a very retentive memory, he exhibited a great taste for reading, and was remarkably fond of investigation. He seldom accepted anything without prior careful study, and the reason of everything must be apparent. What little spare time he was able to snatch from the labors

of the farm, he sedulously devoted to the reading of such works as came within his reach. His father's library, however, being composed of but few books, save of the religious and devotional kind, it is reasonable to suppose that he should become well versed in the Bible and works of a religious character. In his youth, therefore, he perused works on Church History and the Reformation, the lives of the Martyrs, writings of Josephus and those of Menno Simon, besides others; and his inquisitive mind led him thoroughly to investigate the doctrines of the Mennonite church, which he found, like his father before him, to accord with the Gospel. It is doubtful at this time whether he had access to any works on profane history, biography, travels or polite literature. The only works of fiction, indeed, that he ever read, were the writings of John Bunyan; and he uniformly condemned the practice of devoting valuable time to the reading of modern novels. Poetry he appreciated very highly, especially if of a devotional character; and in his mature years he composed hymns on frequent occasions. As regards science, art and rhetoric, he had no opportunities whatever in his youth to acquire a knowledge of them; and yet in his old age he had attained a fund of general information upon all these subjects. His extensive intercourse for many years with various classes of society, some of them the best scholars in the country, his great powers of observation, his faculty for minute analysis, his extraordinary memory and his extensive reading, caused him to become in his latter years, if not profound, at least well informed upon all ordinary topics.

As above stated, John Herr's youth was chiefly spent in the reading of the Bible and other religious works, and in hearing the important question of the soul's salvation and the scheme of redemption discussed by his father, and by those he met in argument. His naturally bright mind availed itself of the opportunity thus afforded, and he soon became well trained in this particular field which so admirably qualified him for the great work for which he was destined. When the period arrived for him to begin the work, his preparation had been of such a character, that he entered

thereon, not simply as in the performance of a duty, but with the greatest of pleasure and zeal did he inaugurate the great work of his life.

Upon the death of his father, being painfully exercised by the conviction of sin, he took occasion to reveal the state of his feelings to some of his father's friends, who were also similarly concerned for their own salvation. But owing to the increase of worldly cares devolved upon him by the death of his father, he permitted himself again to grow languid in his love for Christ, and for a time seemed to regret that he had revealed his spiritual emotions to his friends. This state of feeling having continued for some months, an incident occurred in his career that served to lead him back to God. He now resigned himself wholly to the Lord, and soon found comfort. The friends who had sympathised with his father, were still in the habit of meeting together and mutually comforting each other in spiritual converse. John Herr now became a constant attendant at these meetings. At one of these, held during the year 1810, Mr. Herr was requested to give his experience upon the all important question of the soul's salvation. This was an important epoch in the life of Mr. Herr. Clothed, as he felt, in the garb of truth, and mailed in the armor of righteousness, with the sword of the spirit in his hand, he stepped forward ready to battle and die, if need be, in the cause of the Redeemer. Animated by sympathy for lost humanity, and gratitude to God for His merciful plan of salvation, he addressed the small auditory in words of peace and comfort. Then it was that the firm resolve was made, that come what might, while life would last, his time and talents should be devoted to the cause of Christ; that he would mete out to his fellow-men the consolations of redemption, warn them of their folly and the wickedness of sin, and point out the way of truth as God should vouchsafe to instruct him. In spite of his comparative youth, being but as yet in his twenty-ninth year; in spite of adverse surrounding circumstances, he nevertheless dared the scorn of the ungodly, met the jeers of his associates, and openly braved the opposition of the whole unchristian world. His remarks, altogether

impromptu, breathed severe denunciations of sin and all unrighteousness. And at the same time in burning strains of eloquence he presented to his hearers a vivid delineation of the great richness of divine grace and the wonderful sublimity and awful grandeur of the God conceived plan of salvation for the souls of miserable and fallen men.

The sermon of Mr. Herr, delivered on that occasion, was, as tradition tells us, an extraordinary effort, in the opinion of his illiterate and simple-minded hearers. In their opinion, it surpassed anything they had ever heard. For profundity of sentiment and eloquent invective, poignancy of grief at the wickedness of the age; for clear, logical elucidation of man's requirements; for sublime invocations for mercy and aid, it could not, as his auditors conceived, be surpassed. The effort must have been indeed extraordinary. No sooner was the news spread abroad that Mr. Herr had preached such a powerful sermon, than applications poured in upon him to preach in various parts of the county. His services came in great demand on funeral occasions. He was at once chosen the leader of the new flock. The tree which his father Francis had planted and nursed so carefully for many years, now began to bear its fruit under the auspices of John Herr. The soil was well watered by the penitent tears of himself and co-laborers.

The fact that Mr. Herr was a decided radical on religious subjects; that he would not compromise his views and thereby sacrifice his sense of right, soon brought him into controversy with clergymen of different denominations. Many were the foul charges and false slanders that were heaped upon his head. His motives were impugned and his views misconstrued. Ridicule and derision were hurled at him in great abundance, but they fell harmlessly at his feet. The envenomed shafts of calumny that poured in upon him from every side, never ruffled the serenity of his disposition, or excited in him anything save emotions of pain and sorrow; and in return he simply offered up prayers for the souls of his calumniators. He veritably fulfilled the scripture injunction, in praying for those "*who despitefully use you and persecute you.*" Nothing, however, debarred his onward

progress; the more he was maligned and persecuted, the more strenuous were his exertions; and in spite of the most untoward circumstances, his influence steadily extended. New accessions were constantly being made to the ranks of his sympathizers. In the month of April, 1811, the ordinance of baptism was first administered in the new body. On this occasion Mr. Herr was baptized by Abraham Groff, who, in turn, in company with Abraham Landis, was baptized by Mr. Herr. The organization known as the "Reformed Mennonite," or "New Mennonite" church, was instituted by this trio. They commenced by holding regular meetings at stated periods; instituted the regular church ordinances, such as baptism and the breaking of bread; established a regular system of rules of church government in accordance with the injunctions of the apostles. Mr. Herr was at once recognized as their pastor, and was subsequently elected bishop. Their proceedings occasioned great excitement in the community, and, as a consequence, their meetings were attended by numbers prompted by mere curiosity. Mr. Herr's labors were soon heavy and exacting; he not only preached regularly and attended frequently at funerals, but was continually sought by individuals at home and abroad to offer the consolations of religion at the bedside of the sick and the dying. His time was so largely occupied in duties of this kind, that he was unable to devote much time to his private affairs. In this he greatly sacrificed, as regards pecuniary matters, for he was unwilling to receive any compensation in lieu of his time and services, feeling that the ministrations of the gospel should not be made a means of worldly accumulation; and he from the first, made up his mind to look for his reward in the blessings promised to the faithful who labor in the vineyard of the Lord. Nor did his temporal affairs fail him. Indeed, to such an extent did they flourish, that he had always sufficient to live upon and rear his family in comfort and independence.

In the autumn of the same year, Mr. Herr baptized fifteen penitent souls, among whom was included his wife, who stood by him faithfully in all his trials and tribulations, and his venerable mother. He proceeded in his undertaking in

the even tenor of his way, exhorting, preaching and discussing at times with those that disagreed with him in opinion, and all the while was steadily gaining new converts to his opinions. His object was not, however, to build up a large congregation, merely for the purpose of being their leader. If such had been his design, he might have secured many more followers than he did. He admitted none as members of his congregation without the most thorough examination, and unless ample proof existed of sincere repentance. Candidates, therefore, who desired admission as members of his church, must undergo a searching ordeal and a trying examination in order to test their fitness for such communion. All this he knew was necessary to keep the church pure and uncorrupted. It must be preserved free from all corruption and impurity so far as was possible. He was determined that, so far as lay in his power, no hypocrite, with assumed Christian habiliments, should obtrude himself and interfere with the successful working of the new organization; and when, unhappily, a few such were admitted, and a few fell from grace, he obeyed the apostolic injunction, and of them made stern examples, and treated them as "publicans and heathen." By this constant care and vigilance which he exercised, was he enabled to prevent schism from entering the organization, and likewise rendered it out of the power of pride, worldly allurements and vanity to prevail against it.

The services of Mr. Herr all this time were coming more and more in demand, and many invitations came to him from abroad to preach for them. He visited and preached in the neighboring counties of York, Cumberland, Franklin, Lebanon, Bucks, Montgomery, and others, in most of which he organized congregations and ordained pastors over them, who constantly kept him advised of their proceedings. As a consequence, his correspondence became very large; so much so, indeed, that nearly all his time unoccupied in preaching was required to reply to his correspondents. Nor were his labors by any means confined to the localities above named; he made repeated visits to New York and Canada, when traveling was not a matter of the ease and convenience of the present day. His mode of conveyance was

either on horseback or in those heavy two-horse wagons made use of by emigrants before the spring carriage was invented. On his route he preached at various points, and planted the nuclei of various congregations, that bore in after years abundant fruit. He also made several trips to Ohio and Indiana, when those States were but little reclaimed from their primitive condition of a wilderness, and when the crossing of the Alleghenies was regarded as quite an adventure. He established congregations in both the above named States, as he did also in later years in the State of Illinois. As he became advanced in years, and the fruits of his labors were ripening in distant and more extended regions, his correspondence grew still more voluminous, so much so that it became necessary for him to call in aid to assist him in his labors. His prayers for aid in his arduous work were not in vain. A band of laborers grew up around him who were able to challenge the world for piety, disinterested benevolence and purity of life. Though not of the refined and educated, nevertheless, like the humble fishermen of Galilee, they were mailed in the holy armor of gospel truth, and with devoted hearts and heroic spirits they were amply qualified to fight the battles of the Lord. These came to Mr. Herr's aid, and largely relieved him of the details of superintendence. But never, until the day of his death, did anything important or unusual transpire in church affairs, either at home or abroad, without his knowledge and never did an important question arise in the whole church of his organization, wherever scattered, that was not referred to him for solution.

Notwithstanding Mr. Herr's great correspondence and other labors connected with the ministrations of church affairs, he still found time to write several volumes and pamphlets upon religious topics. They were all written in German, with the exception of that entitled, his "Remarkable Vision," which he wrote in English. The others were all translated into English, and passed through several editions. In this brief sketch we are unable to analyze his writings, and speak of them all severally as they deserve. Of his "Vision," this, however, may be said: that it is a remarkable

work in every sense, and one that indicates a genius of a high order; and the little work will not suffer when placed in comparison alongside of the "Pilgrim's Progress."

Mr. Herr maintained an epistolary controversy with a pastor of the Moravian church of Litiz, which finally resulted in a pamphlet, entitled "a brief and apostolical answer," which was published in the year 1819. It is clear, at this late day, that Mr. Herr had the best of the argument; and his clerical antagonist seemed to think so himself, as he never saw proper to reply. This was not the only instance that Mr. Herr had such correspondence with clergymen, but it is the only one that was published.

Had John Herr received the culture of a classical education and made politics his study, he could have become a leader in spite of all opposition. He was an admirable judge of mankind, and could intuitively almost, as it were, select those who should execute what he desired to be accomplished. It is not known, indeed, that he was ever deceived in a single instance in any of his appointees, whether for the transaction of church or business matters. And it is somewhat remarkable that, as in accordance with his religious opinions, a resort to legal tribunals was not warranted; yet in business affairs he became the dupe of sharpers and knaves to a much less extent than is usually the case with business men.

He was a natural born orator. His oratory was both emphatic and persuasive. He was grandly eloquent when he wished to enforce a truth or depict the evils of sin. A leading feature of his character was his earnestness and sincerity. His reasoning powers were of a high order, and in argumentative discourse he had few if any equals. He had a fine voice, and when appealing to sinners to turn from their evil ways, (and on such occasions made use of his persuasive powers,) the effect was electrical. He was a sound logician, and fortified his arguments by appropriate quotations. He never spoke from notes, and his impromptu efforts on the spur of the occasion were frequently his most successful ones.

He was a radical in religion, and would have been in politics had he given it any attention; but his mind was so

equally poised, that he never would have become agrarian. His mind was so well balanced, that under no circumstances did he despond or become unduly excited. He possessed extraordinary good judgment, was frequently an arbiter between neighbors, when a dispute arose between them, and his decisions were always satisfactory. His disposition was mild and childlike in simplicity; the pauper and degraded had as free access to his attention as the most respected. His kindness of heart was so proverbial, that he never could gainsay a legitimate request; but when anything was demanded contrary to his principles, no inducement could swerve him from his course. Except in his religious views, it is doubtful if John Herr ever had an enemy; his business transactions were of such a nature that no one ever took umbrage thereat; on the contrary, all his acquaintances were so attracted by the excellency of his conduct, the unselfishness of his motives, and by the unostentatious benevolence that characterized all his labors, both temporal and spiritual, that they became his devoted friends.

Mr. Herr's sole and only aim in this life, seems to have been to prepare himself, and point out the way to others, for a life in the future. And as every person with whom he came in contact soon became convinced of his sincerity, they respected him on account of his motives, even though they differed with him in opinion. In the family relation he was a perfect model as a son, husband and father. He filled all these relations creditable to human nature. That he had his failings in temper and desire, no one was more conscious than himself; and of this he gave frequent evidence in the pulpit and his writings. But take Rev. John Herr all in all, and it may be said of him by one who knew him for many years, that "his like will not soon be found again."

John Herr was married in 1808, to Elizabeth Groff, a descendant of Hans Groff, the head of one of the surviving families who accompanied Hans Herr from Switzerland. They had ten children, two of whom died in infancy. In accordance with his sense of duty, Mr. Herr took his last trip to Canada in 1850. He preached a sermon in the evening, traveled to a neighbor's house to spend the night, and

died on the 3d of May, 1850, far from his wife, his kindred and connections, and at peace with all the world. He calmly and willingly resigned his soul into the hands of his Creator, in the firm and abiding hope that he should receive the crown of glory prepared for the faithful in the mansions of eternal rest.